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# DENOMINATIONAL SCHOOL IDENTITY AND THE FORMATION OF PERSONAL IDENTITY

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## Abstract

Three important factors determine the institutional identity of denominational (Christian) schools: their interpretation of the religious truth claim, their conception of the nature of education, and their view of cultural differences as content of education. We investigate conceptually which of these interpretations of identity are consonant with a view of education as a place where the personal identity of students is constructed. We interpret personal identity in a narrative way, as a permanent process of reflexive construction where consistency over time is not seen as an ideal, given the plurality of postmodern culture.

## IDENTITY

The central tenet of our contribution is easily stated, though not as easily explained. Schools should be places that help and guide students in developing a personal identity, and the way schools interpret their own position and mission (their institutional identity) can be either helpful or problematic in achieving this. In exploring this relation, we give special attention to the denominational aspect of school identity, that is, the way schools interpret their commitment to (Christian) religious views.

The term "identity" is used in a double sense: to relate the identity of institutions (in this case, the denominational identity of a school) to the emerging identity of persons. Before we can meaningfully explore that relation, we have to explain how we interpret the concept of identity, as the meaning we attach to it differs in some respects from its common usage. We first develop the concept of identity as used in relation to individuals.

The term identity is commonly used to indicate a relatively stable way that the individual has of relating to himself or herself and to the

world outside (e.g., Erikson 1968; Rorty and Wong 1990). But in our view, such a modernist view of identity, as a stable and essential core of personality that has either been discovered or developed in a process of personality development taking place in adolescence, has become untenable. We cannot conceive of identity any more as of something that develops progressively within a limited period, culminating in the achievement of a stable identity status. Instead, we think of identity and personality in a more postmodern way: as a continuous activity of construction and deconstruction, of developing, maintaining, and evaluating personal commitments to values, persons, and practices. Although postmodern theory does not (yet) offer one consistent theory of this process (cf. Cox & Lyddon 1997), we think a model couched in narrative terms (cf. Penuel & Wertsch 1995) is the most promising (or anyway, the one that we feel most comfortable with at this moment). On this view, identity is the way we explain, in the form of a life story (autobiography), the choices we make in our commitments, and their consistency, to others and to ourselves. The advantage of this model over others is that it does not posit the individual as the sole creator of its own self-concept. Individual stories are created through the use of story schemata, genres, motives, metaphors, examples, and other elements that are found in culture. (It is exactly the use of such cultural elements that makes an individual's story comprehensible to others and to the self.) Moreover, other people play a role in the construction process: as audience, as people to relate the story to, as co-constructors. This implies that personal differences are related to each individual's process of creating and maintaining a personal story, but also to the specific affordances and limitations that a culture offers a specific person. These affordances and limitations are of various nature: the story schemata and examples mentioned above, but also the opportunities a culture offers to specific people (and maybe not to others) of participating in certain practices in specific capacities or positions, of learning certain skills and knowledge elements, of communicating with certain others; and the help afforded in using such elements to construct an identity story. The outcome of this process of identity construction will be different for every person; there is no such thing as the "right" outcome.

Moreover, a characteristic of our present culture is that cultural practices and traditions manifestly do not form a harmonic ensemble, nor a static one. They interpenetrate each other, and at any given time a person may participate in a number of practices which are not mu-

tually consonant. This is one of the reasons that constructing an identity story is a difficult and continuing task, maybe more so than a number of decades ago.

## EDUCATION AND PERSONAL IDENTITY

Education has a double function in the continuous creation of identity stories. On the one hand, it presents the students with a richer array of story composition elements than most of them would have access to outside the institution. On the other hand, it challenges their present stories by showing that the world outside is more complicated, different from what they thought, and thus, requires a different relation to it. It offers opportunities for learning to participate in more traditions, and in other capacities and roles, than those that students would have access to on their own. It should also offer opportunities to learn to handle contradictions between practices, and to construct identity stories that do not rest on simply closing one's eyes to such contradictions. We conceive of the main task of education as empowering students to do exactly this. Learning processes, in this view, are ultimately *not* just about the acquisition of knowledge and skills, *not* just about building cognitive and emotional maps of the world. They are about learning to see oneself as a possible participant and contributor to cultural practices and traditions, as somebody who has a commitment to such practices and their inherent values. This requires a continuous work of revising one's relation to a world that is always seen in a different light as one learns more about it, and thus, posits a challenge of revising one's identity story. Shortly, the real goal of all education is the enhancement of identity processes in their relation to cultural processes and traditions.

This implies that attention to the personal development of students is not an extra, something that is added to the curriculum content, or something that needs to be provided for as a necessary condition before real learning (of knowledge and skills) can begin. On the contrary, knowledge and skills are among the building stones for the students with which to construct their identities, and it is this construction process that determines whether a student will succeed in life.

## PERSONAL IDENTITY AND THE SCHOOL'S CONCEPT OF EDUCATION

Schools differ in the opportunities they afford students for the type of learning processes that we intend here. This is because schools have their own identity stories in relation to their aims, what they want the students to become, and what their role in this process can be. As with individuals, these identity stories guide their actions. (Also, as with individuals, they do not *determine* their actions—good stories are sufficiently vague, open and even contradictory that they afford a lot of room for the unexpected.) The institutional identity stories of schools have multiple dimensions. Later in this article, we concentrate on different types of *denominational* school identity and their underlying constituents, and we relate these types of denominational school identity to our preferred narrative conception of personal identity, asking in what way they can be combined. Here, however, we must first point out that there is an important relation between the help and possibilities schools afford students in constructing their identities, and how the school interprets its *educational* task or educational identity.

We use the distinction between the *transmission* and the *transformation* conceptions of education (cf. Jackson 1986; Wardekker 1994; Miedema 1997) to elaborate the concept of educational identity. The different epistemological basis of both views is crucial for the distinction between these two conceptions of education.

Foundational for the transmission conception is the existence of the ontological subject–object split. There is an objective world of meanings and facts that the developing student needs to master. In this view the teacher is seen as the mediator of the objective stock of knowledge, that is, the accumulated culturally based insights and facts, that need to be transferred to the students in order for them to adapt to and be able to take part in society. The process of transmission can be conceived of as passive or as active. In the latter case, the students are learning to learn; they acquire knowledge and skills in an active way supported by the teacher operating as supervisor, tutor or mentor. In both the passive and the active mode, however, the students should master the objective facts and general procedures. They should learn these facts and procedures precisely in the way as they are represented in the subject matter, the curriculum documents.

In the transformative view of education, on the other hand, the acquisition of knowledge and skills, and of norms and values as modes

of being, knowing, feeling and acting is not, ontologically speaking, taken in the dualistic subject-object way, but in a holistic or transactional way. In such a transformation conception of education, learning is defined as the growing capacity or the growing competency of students to participate in culturally structured activities. This learning process proceeds along the line of participation (learning-to-join-in-activities). The core aspect of the learning process is not the transmission of teachable content or subject matter, of knowledge, skills, values and norms, but rather the transformation of it. In other words, considerations of subject matter are not the main criteria for a successful learning process, but only the starting points for learning processes. The transformation by definition takes place in a social context or setting. A context that is not to be interpreted as limiting, but, on the contrary, as constitutive for all socially and culturally situated and structured acting and actions. Thus, we can formulate the aim of the school as enabling students to participate in socially and culturally structured activities that take place at a certain time and that are located within a particular societal setting.

From the definition of learning as participation and transformation, it follows that learning is seen neither as exclusively cognitive nor as an individualistic act, but that all domains of human ability and potentiality should be taken into account by the school (be it cognitive, creative, moral, religious, expressive, etc.). We emphasize that the transformation is an active process on the part of the student. In the process of transformation, the subject matter (being the starting point) becomes the personal property of the student. So, the transformation is an activity authored by the students themselves. It is necessary that students take this step in order to acquire their own personal identity.

It will be clear from this description that a school that has a transformative conception of its task will try to offer to its students opportunities and help in the process of learning to construct and maintain an identity story. The transmission view, on the other hand, can hardly acknowledge a relation between instructional content and personality construction. After all, learning to see the world as it is has little to do with the way one sees oneself and one's own position. Personality construction is, thus, restricted to the extracurricular domain; it has to do with school culture, with the human treatment of students, but not with the contents of instruction. There is, however, one exception: the transmission view presupposes the will and ability to act rationally,

that is, guided by knowledge. Those elements of culture that are more in the realm of emotions and affects tend to be excluded. There is, thus, a tension between the curriculum and extracurricular activities that is difficult to handle for schools that do see personality development as part of their responsibility.

## CONCEPTIONS OF CONTENT

From the preceding section, it follows that in our view the opportunities a school affords for identity development are directly related to curriculum content and not just an extracurricular activity. Therefore, it is important how a school conceives of its curriculum. In the introduction we described our present culture as characterized by cultural practices and traditions that manifestly do not form a harmonic or a static ensemble. Immediately related to this description is the school's view on the homogeneity or heterogeneity of the content of teaching and learning.

We distinguish three strategies in dealing with the present plurality of cultural meanings as potential subject matter for teaching and learning processes (cf. Wardekker 1996).

In the *preclusion strategy* all cultural meanings that are not exactly in accordance with the own cultural and religious convictions are excluded. A homogeneous "we" culture is constituted by positioning all dishomogeneous elements in an opposing "they" culture. Intercultural communication is blocked, and potential possibilities for teaching and learning are thus restricted. Feelings of cultural superiority as well as anxiety can be the driving force for this process of exclusion. The preclusion strategy does exactly what its name implies. It precludes students from seeing the differences between cultures as interesting and relevant, and thus, gives no impetus to the construction of identity stories. Moreover, it restricts the range of narrative elements from which to construct such stories.

In the *equality strategy* all cultures and views of reality are treated as being of equal value. In this approach cultural diversity is positively valued. The ideal individual, however, is seen as homogeneous, a center of consistent decisions. To be able to handle the plurality of cultural meanings, the student, therefore, needs to build up a strong, harmonious, and consistent personal identity, which is thought of either in terms of strict logical rationality or of "authenticity," of being



able to make decisions that are true to one's own inner structure. It is the school's task to contribute to the student's acting and thinking in a consistent way, either by enhancing rationality or by promoting authenticity.

The plurality of cultural meanings itself is interpreted as a potential possibility for permanent learning and teaching in the *pluralistic strategy*. Consistency is not seen as a prerequisite or as an ideal to be reached as soon as possible, but as localized and temporary, always open to revision. Identity becomes a project. Great value is attached to the student's ability to handle plurality in a creative way, that is, the student learns to be open to changes and differences without feeling threatened. Plurality and difference are made discussible and become the object of reflection, a starting point for the transformation of meaning. However, this is not an accomplishment of the solitary individual. In dialogue, communication, and cooperation, new ways of interpreting the world and one's position in it are initiated, tried out, and evaluated.

## TYPES OF DENOMINATIONAL SCHOOL IDENTITY

As we said, the institutional identity stories of schools have multiple dimensions. In the following section, we concentrate on the denominational aspect, or the way schools interpret their relation to (Christian) religion, for which we will construct a taxonomy. We ask what types of this relation (i.e., what forms of identity) are consistent with the task of the school in the formation of personal identity as outlined above.

One thing should be clear from the beginning. It is possible to think of denominationally-bound schools as places that, besides opening a way into a number of other cultural practices, have a special task in introducing their students into religious practices and traditions. In such a view, religious practices form a separate domain of reality that does not interpenetrate other domains. This, however, is not how most of these schools think of themselves; indeed, they would consider their mission failed if aspects of a religious identity did not carry over into other cultural domains. We, therefore, concentrate on questions of personal identity in general, not on the specifics of education in religious practices.

On the basis of conceptual analyses of publications in German, Dutch, and English and sustained by recent empirical research (cf.

De Ruyter & Miedema 1997; De Wolff 2000) we distinguish four types of denominational school identity: segregated schools, program schools, encounter schools, and interreligious schools. Our theoretical as well as empirical research shows that schools have difficulties in giving form and content to an integrated or comprehensive conceptualization of the relation between the educational and the religious aspects of the school identity. So, the status of our typification or taxonomy is reconstructive as well as constructive and normative.

Most denominational (i.e., Christian) schools characterize themselves almost exclusively by the interpretation they give of the religious truth claim. To characterize the school identity types by this constituent element, we use the concepts of exclusivity, inclusivity, and plurality from the theology of religions (cf. Ziebertz 1994, 151 ff.).

The *exclusivity* concept in the Christian tradition claims that there is no other way for people to find salvation aside from the belief in Jesus Christ. Other religions can not offer the salvation of God as revealed in the Bible and in Jesus.

Characteristic for the *inclusivity* concept is the view that God's revelation and real experiences of God can also be found in other religions than the Christian one. However, the revelation related with Jesus Christ is interpreted as the ultimate salvation. In the theology of religions, this stance is sometimes negatively characterized as an annexation strategy.

In the *plurality* concept the relational nature of the truth of all religions is emphasized. Truth itself is pluralistic and is constructed in a substantial dialogue by means of reciprocal religious communication.

We use these theological concepts to characterize four types of schools. *Segregated schools* embody the exclusivity concept of the religious truth claim. The absolute true belief can only be found in the God of the Bible and in His Son, Jesus Christ. This belief should be the missionary message in the school, of the church, and in the families. That is why there is complete correspondence between the religious basic assumptions of the denominational school, the church, and the families of the students attending such a school. The school is closed to teachers and students who adhere to other religions, and only open for those who want to give form and content to the fundamental convictions in an active way. The basic assumptions of the school are formulated in church terms as a fixed, binding credo that has to be accepted. Stress is placed on the homogeneity of the religious convic-

tions of all participants involved in and related to the school. The school as a relatively closed “pedagogical province” offers the best situations and relations to transmit the subject matter of the Christian tradition and sustains the students to develop into God-fearing individuals.

Characteristic for *program schools* is their religious stance, which is formulated by the pedagogical professionals. Due to the religious heterogeneity of the schools’ student population, and to avoid that the religious subject matter should become dependent of the view of the parents, the teachers want to communicate the religious position of their school in a clear way via the program. The school is closed to teachers who adhere to other than the Christian religion, but open for all students whose parents respect the basic religious assumptions of the school as formulated in the school’s program. The interpretation of the Christian tradition, however, is personal rather than church-institutionally bound, within certain limits. If the religious truth claim in respect to the Christian religion is still exclusive (i.e., interpreted in absolutist terms) the handling of the Christian religion by non-Christian students can be dealt with in terms of a pedagogical, didactical, or developmental problem only. So, the problem is in what way the subject matter of the Christian religion can most adequately be transmitted to the non-Christian students. Such a program school version (which we call program school-1) is just a sophisticated version of the segregated school type. The segregated school, and to a somewhat lesser extent the program school-1, create an environment in which the possibilities of informal contact with different views of religious culture are greatly reduced, and the way that other interpretations are perceived is strictly controlled. (It is imaginable, though not probable, that teachers will present those other views in a pluralistic way.) As a consequence, this conception of school identity restricts the space students have for constructing their own identities.

The program school-1 is open to non-Christian students, but the starting point and the criterion for adequate teaching and learning are the content of the Christian tradition. If, however, the basic religious assumptions of the program are formulated in exclusivist terms, but, in the classroom praxis, the teachers interpret these assumptions in an inclusive way (we call this program school-2), the school identity is rather ambivalent. The school’s problem is how to deal with an inclusivist praxis combined with an exclusivist program. This may be the case when the teacher wants to reckon with the starting point of the students in toto (including the cultural and religious starting point

of students from other than the Christian religion). In practice, this may mean that when, for example, Christmas is celebrated in the school and the story from the Bible of Jesus's birth is told or read and rituals and symbols are experienced, children (parents, imams, or pundits) may bring in the parallel "celebration of light" of their religious tradition, and no surplus value or privileged position is claimed for the Christian celebration.

In the (Christian) *encounter schools* the God of other religions (at least the one of the monotheistic religions) is considered to be the same as the God of the Bible, but the exceptional value of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ is maintained. The school is open to students from all religions, and sometimes also teachers from other than the Christian religion are appointed. The teachers explicitly try to deal with the cultural and religious knowledge, practices, and experiences that the students embody on the basis of their family upbringing. Other religions, however, are always put into a perspective based on the Christian tradition. Just like in the program school-2 identity type (see the practical example mentioned above), there is a tension in this view between a theologically speaking exclusivist and inclusivist truth claim (see also Ziebertz 1994, 191).

*Interreligious schools* neither adhere to an exclusivist nor an inclusivist religious truth claim, but emphasize that the truth itself is pluralistic and by its nature relational. Stress is laid on mutual religious communication and dialogue about the diverse underlying assumptions of the religions embodied by teachers and students. The school is open to students and teachers who are in an active way committed to a religion. A promotion of a relativistic stance toward the diversity of religious background of the students is not intended, but the school wants to offer real possibilities in practical situations and relations for the cultivation of the religious identity formation of the students. It is this situation of religious pluriformity that gives this school its specific denominational identity profile.

## COMBINING THE COMPONENTS OF SCHOOL IDENTITY

We have now analyzed three possible components of school identity: educational, content strategic, and denominational. The question now poses itself, of course, how schools combine the identity elements

from different components. This is a question for empirical research that we have not yet completed. The question for a reconstructive theory, however, is whether the identity conceptions of schools are internally consistent, and whether they are consistent with a narrative theory of personal identity construction for their students such as we delineated in the first section of this article. So, our question is how do different combinations of the four types of schools (based on the different religious truth claims), the two conceptions of education (transmission and transformation), and the three conceptions of the content of teaching and learning (preclusion, equality, and pluralistic strategy) relate to our narrative view on the formation of personal identity—in our opinion the main aim of school education?

It is entirely possible for schools to build their ideas about their institutional identity on the choice of the transmission, preclusion, and segregation views, respectively. In fact, many traditional denominational schools probably style themselves on such a narrative, in one version or another. These three elements provide for an intuitive internal consistency in which restrictions on students' thinking and construction of identity are probably seen as a form of protection for the child. However, it is doubtful that this kind of protection can adequately prepare students for life in contemporary society.

A different view of the role of schools in the development of personal identity was presented by Bryk, Lee, and Holland (1993). They emphasize the community character of school life. School is "a network of social relations, characterized by trust" (p. 314). In trying to promote the experience of a just community, teachers and students discuss and reflect on their own lives in the context of questions about the relation and nature of person and society. Although this institutional identity narrative is well formulated and consistent, it does not fully meet our ideals for personal identity construction because it seems to rely heavily on creating a feeling of "belongingness" in which differences tend to be excluded.

On the other end of the scale, a school identity that emphasizes transformation of knowledge, pluralistic cultural strategies, and a relational view of religious conceptions would offer the most and best opportunities to students for finding elements and incentives for the construction of personal identity stories.

Many other combinations are possible, but not all of them are consistent. It is an interesting question for empirical research which combinations are actually used, and whether institutions, teachers,

parents, and students are aware of the possible contradictions and have found ways to handle these.

Finally, we want to emphasize that identity narratives are narratives that guide but do not determine action. If a school propagates a certain picture of its own functioning, that does not necessarily mean that everything that happens inside the school conforms to that picture. Neither does it mean that the outcomes in terms of identity development of students that the school aims at will be actually substantiated, because these outcomes are dependent on the process of meaning giving by the students. This implies that there is no strictly implicative relation between institutional identity and the identity construction processes of students. This points to a further field for empirical research.

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